

*Boots*

Adam waded through snow knee deep in the ravines and over-topping his boots every other place he stepped and his socks were soaked and his feet numb and every snap of every dead branch that broke with his weight trilled up his calves and hamstrings and made it feel like his hips would explode. The snow had come on in an instant and piled a thick layer over the deep crust that had already been on the ground for weeks. Gray one minute, the next minute the sky turned nearly purple and the wind, crisp and tinged with wood smoke, changed to an arctic blast.

But in a lull, he saw a cabin set into the tree-line on the ridge ahead. Forlorn among the ponderosa pines, the little hut's sagging roof and single window made the thing look like a block-headed cyclops peeping over the ridge. He floundered to it, tromping and bounding through the snow in zags like a wild animal, and found it unlocked, open. The abrupt stillness inside burned his cheeks. He stomped his boots and the snow fell from his hiking pants in squared-off chunks and he lurched around the cabin on half numbed legs. His daypack slid from his shoulders to the floor.

There was a small fireplace with a hearth as high as two stacked bricks. The build-out for the flue, from the firebox to the rafters, was crumbled brick and the mortar joints had mostly flaked away. To the left of the fireplace lay a snarl of twigs and branches, some spindly and thin as matchsticks and others white like snapped animal bones. He took a step toward the pile, but in the same instant, something smashed the side of his head and his brain flooded with lightning. His sank to the floor and the disappearing light thrummed over him like owl wings.

When Adam came to, there was a fire in the fireplace and his groggy consciousness dragged the pile of sticks and branches, the cabin, and the snowstorm back to the forefront of his mind. He tried to stand but his legs wouldn't come apart and the energy he'd used to try to stand

pushed him onto his side. He rolled on the floor like a swatted bug. His arms, he realized then, were bound at the wrists behind his back.

“Sorry about clobbering you in the head.” The voice was hoarse and small.

“I didn’t expect no company and you scared the shit out of me, to be honest.”

Adam tried to talk but could only groan.

“We’ll get warmed up here in a minute.”

A stooped figure in dull orange pants and a giant, black parka with the hood up stepped out from somewhere behind Adam and scurried to the pile of branches and sticks. He picked up a bundle and tossed it onto the fire and the flames receded while coils of thick smoke unraveled and drifted up the chimney.

“Why am I tied up?” Adam said. His voice sounded like he was dying of thirst.

“I’m sorry about that too. I had to use your pack for some things. Pocket knife, that little lighter you had. That’s where the fire come from. I didn’t have no light. Glad as hell you did. Probably saved me and you’s lives.”

Adam heaved his body back and forth until the momentum carried him up to his ass.

“But I didn’t have any rope with me,” he said.

“Your pack had them straps though.”

“Why hit me and tie me up in the first place?”

“I don’t trust too many people, that’s all. Not where I come from.”

“Where’s that?”

“Penitentiary.” He dropped the word into the cabin like an old sack of flour.

“Well, I don’t have anything else you want.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Nothing.” Adam’s heartbeat pounded the backs of his eyes.

“You figure me for a thief. That was fast.”

“No. I just mean I don’t have anything else. The matches, the knife. If that’s what you’ve got, you’ve got all I brought with me.”

“You figure wrong about me.”

“I’m not figuring anything.”

“I know you don’t think I’m some corporate fuck who conned his own rich ass people.”

“No. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean anything.”

The fire grew and the pile of sticks sprouted orange and yellow flames and the new light threw flashes and shadows all over the cabin.

“So, you want to know my name first or what I done first?” the figure said.

“What’s your name?”

A thin cloud of breath rolled from underneath the hood and caught the firelight so the figure, for an instant, looked like a wilted dragon.

“Jeremy,” he said, “And you’s Adam.”

“How did you—”

“I just peeked in your wallet when you was knocked out. I didn’t take nothing, only wanted to find out who my new roommate was. All your insurance info, driver’s license, credit cards, your twenty-six bucks, it’s all still in there.”

“Why don’t you untie me now?”

“We’ll get there.”

The fire grew and the sticks Jeremy had thrown in turned black, then gray and broke in two and slid down the little pile of coals and rested, smoking wildly in the corners of the

fireplace. Jeremy got to his feet and yanked longer, thicker branches from the bottom of the pile and snapped them in half over his knee and tossed them in. They were wet and nearly turned the fireplace into a hissing, black maw. Most of the light disappeared and the heat too, and Adam's teeth started to chatter. Jeremy said, "It'll get warmed up in here again pretty quick."

The wood popped and sizzled and the flames flickered and grew. Jeremy stood up and stepped over to Adam, bent down, and unlaced Adam's boots.

"These are nice," Jeremy said, "Danners."

"Don't take my fucking boots."

Jeremy yanked the boots off and pulled the tongues down so they touched the toes, and laid them on the hearth, open, facing the fire. Then he peeled off Adam's merino socks and stretched them out and laid them in two lines next to one another by the boots.

"Ain't sure how long you're planning to stay," Jeremy said, "I'm gone in the morning."

"I wasn't planning to be here at all. I should've been home a long time ago."

"Got a wife?"

"No."

"Girlfriend?"

"No."

"Boyfriend?"

"My girlfriend broke up with me a couple of months ago."

"Shame. Sorry about that."

"How long have you been out here?"

“When I run off, you mean?” Jeremy sat again and stretched out his legs and crossed them at the ankles. Mud and water stained the orange pants past his knees and his shoes were canvas slip-ons.

“Sure,” Adam said.

“Couple days ago.”

“Going to Mexico?”

“Maybe. Or maybe Honduras, Paraguay. Maybe Patagonia. By the way, you forgot one thing that I got now that you brought with you.”

“What?”

“Trail mix. I left you your half.” Jeremy tossed the gallon sized Ziploc, half empty, across the room, and it landed with a dead crack on the old wooden floor.

“You’ve got me tied up. How am I supposed to eat?”

“Just slide your hands out from under your ass.”

The rest of the night, they dozed sitting up, Adam, straight backed and Jeremy with his back against the wall, head on his knees. They plunged into deep sleeps, sometimes rising suddenly to consciousness like corks in a bucket of water, before they sank again back into blackness. Just as the sun began to rise, Jeremy sputtered and woke up. Outside, a dull yellow light had begun to coat the snow like a growth. He wiped his eyes and crawled to the wood pile and picked the last of the big lengths and lay them in the fireplace. He blew on last night’s ashes and they leapt away from the shot of breath like an electrocuted animal. He blew again, and slivers of orange crept across the coals. And again, until licks of flame hopped up from the middle. Finally, he stood and toed Adam in the back. “Sun’s coming up.”

Sleep left Adam like a dead thing being dragged off his body.

“Get up,” Jeremy said.

“What?”

“Get the fuck up.” He took a step toward Adam, grabbed him under the arm pits, and hauled him to his feet. He untied the strap that bound Adam’s wrists and from the pocket of his parka, Jeremy took the knife—Adam’s knife—opened the blade, and held it at Adam’s face.

“Get your coat off. Shirt too. Hurry your ass up.”

“Come on. Don’t do this. I thought—”

“Now.” Jeremy jabbed the knife at Adam’s neck.

Adam unzipped his coat and took off his sweater and the Henley underneath, and stood naked to the waist, arms crossed, facing the knife, facing Jeremy. “Don’t hurt me, okay, please.”

“Shut up. Turn around. Give me your hands.” And he rewrapped Adam’s wrists behind him.

“Truth is,” Jeremy said, “I didn’t have no plan. The other morning, hell, I fully expected to never see the outside world for another ten years at least. Yet here I am. I just run off when an opportunity come. I ain’t no killer and I ain’t been nothing but good to you these last twelve hours. I didn’t have to be that way. You owe me for that, I figure—”

“Please—”

“Shut the fuck up. Listen. I ain’t dumb. Soon as you get back to civilization, you’re going to tell. You know that and I know that and that’s the way it is.”

“I swear to God, I—”

“Shut up.” Jeremy moved closer with the knife. “I want you to remember something. I seen your driver’s license. Maybe or maybe not I remember where you live.”

“I won’t fucking tell a single goddamn—”

“You will.” Jeremy turned and stooped and grabbed a branch from the fireplace, a branch about a foot long. Half was still covered in scaly bark, but the other was glowing and the tip was feathered with fire.

“I ain’t a killer now, but ain’t nobody knows about tomorrow.” Then he grabbed Adam’s hair and jammed the branch against Adam’s chest. Adam screamed and stumbled and fell and Jeremy was on top of him, knee in his guts, branding him again and again. The embered tip finally broke off and Jeremy got up and crushed it under his shoe.

“Now you’ll remember me,” Jeremy said, “Now you’ll think about me when you think about who you’re going to tell.”

Adam lay on the floor and tried to change himself into a mouse or a bug, or the carcass of either. To scurry to a feathered hole and lick his wounds. Or to drop between the floorboards and hold tight upside down. Or to just be completely, impossibly still. He listened to Jeremy scabble around the cabin, and his whole body jolted when Jeremy came close again. He lifted Adam’s wrists and sawed through the bindings with the knife.

“I’m keeping your knife and your pack. I figure I need them more than you now. It ain’t a question of me being mean, just the lay of the entire situation,” he said, “You’ll be alright in a couple days, maybe three. I left your boots.”

The front door opened and whumped closed, and it was quiet then except for a few coals snapping in the fire place. The morning sun streamed through the window and the clean smell of the snow began to fill the cabin. Crows called to one another and their sharp cries carried for miles. Finally, Adam sat up.

His chest was a mass of black welts, some of them circular and collared in blood, and some only half circles of gray ash. There were pink and white rips in his skin too, and blood had

begun to stream from them. He didn't feel any pain until he got to his feet, and then it came all at once and it felt like a planer running over his skin, neck to belly and back up over and over again.

He limped outside and packed snow against his chest and screamed as the cold and pain nearly tore him in half. He dropped to his knees and gathered more snow with his hands and forearms and hugged it to himself and when it fell from his skin, red and orange and black with the impressions of his wounds, he pivoted to a clean spot and grabbed more, snow by the fistful, and clapped it to his chest and gut until everything was numb. Then he teetered inside and put his clothes back on. His boots were still there, where Jeremy had left them, sideways on the hearth and open to the fire. He shoved his hand inside each of them and they were dry now, and warm.